CHRIST AND THE COMMONPLACE
Luke 24:13-32
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It happened to Moses one day as he was tending a flock of sheep: a voice from out of a burning bush telling him to take off his shoes because the ground on which he was standing was holy; telling him to go down to Egypt and lead God's people into freedom. It happened to Isaiah, mysteriously in the Temple one day: the air was full of the smoke and aroma of incense, six-winged seraphim flew back and forth, one of whom touched Isaiah's lips with a burning coal and out of that tremendous experience God called the prophet. It happened to St. Paul, Saul of Tarsus as he was known then, one day on the road to Damascus. There was a blinding light which knocked him down and the risen Christ appeared. Joan of Arc had "her voices". It happened to Peter Marshall in the middle of a violent thunderstorm and Oral Roberts recently saw a vision of a 900 foot tall Jesus telling him to build his medical center in Tulsa.

The trouble is that most of us have not had a comparable religious experience. It's not that we doubt that others have them, or are having them today. It's just that nothing remotely like what happened to Moses, Isaiah, or Paul has ever happened to us. Many of us, as a consequence, spend most of our lives wondering if what we have is the real thing: wondering if we're missing something, feeling envy even at those people in history, or our friends for that matter, whose faith is grounded in some verifiable experience which involved their senses; something they saw or heard or smelled or touched. We don't admit it and we certainly wouldn't choose to discuss it but somewhere deep in many of us is the feeling that since we have not had our faith confirmed in some marvelous experience and others have, God must not be interested in us, or we aren't good enough, or spiritual enough, or we aren't trying hard enough. Sometimes it occurs to us that our own poverty of religious experience means that the whole business is simply fantasy and the people who claim to have had that kind of experience are blessed with hyper-active imaginations.

Scratch the surface of a Presbyterian and before long you will encounter something like what I have been saying. And that is why I love the story of Emmaus. It really isn't an extraordinary story at all. In fact, it is utterly commonplace. It can't hold a candle, in terms of drama and high emotional content, to most of the experiences which will be the subject of intense testimony on radio and TV this morning. What happened at Emmaus gathers up our humanity, our ordinariness and speaks directly to the whole matter of the concerns, questions and cynicism we have about religious experience.

The setting is Easter Day, but the story belongs more to the Season of Eastertide, the time when Christians think about the continuing reality of the resurrection. In any event, it is after the fact, later in the day on Sunday, the first day of a new week. Sunday morning in Jerusalem was like a Monday in Columbus. The Passover Sabbath was over, most of the pilgrims had headed home, the market place was back in business, the banks open, and life was returning to normal. The disciples of Jesus, in the meantime, were acting like members of a family the day after a funeral. Life has to go on somehow but you have the distinct sense that everything is different, that you're a little out of step. You're surprised to see the sun shining and the shops open and people going about their business.

The disciples' situation was complicated even further on that first day of a new week. None of them had performed very well in the final hours of His life.

The broad assumption adrift in the land is that when God acts He will do so in a way that is verifiable by the senses. He will speak in a voice that can be heard or perform a miracle that can be seen. Those who don't agree or who haven't had the experience are left, therefore, feeling spiritually inadequate, tottering on the edge of unbelief. "Lord, if you are there, please give me something to hold onto!"

A theologian friend of mine from Louisville Seminary was addressing a Conference for church leaders on the future last week. He recited the standard list of concerns about that future: poverty, violence, energy, economic justice in the Third World. He profoundly disturbed many in the conference with a statement something like this. "Brothers and sisters: we are fresh out of miracles. God is not going to part the Red Sea this time around." What he meant was that God does His miracle working through people and always has. God wasn't the only actor at the Red Sea: it took Moses' audacity and foolhardy leadership and the people's faith and courage to wade in. In fact, that is the real miracle at the Red Sea, as you think about it: not God parting the waters - but the courage of the people to walk in. Centuries later when they wrote it down they gave God the credit, which is a good thing, except that too many people keep waiting for Him to do something like it again - which He would be happy to do if someone will contribute leadership like Moses and if others will be brave and obedient and faithful.

If we just paid a little more attention to the Bible we would know better, of course. Those men on the way to Emmaus didn't experience the Risen Christ in a blaze of glorious light: they weren't knocked off their feet by His radiance. As a matter of fact they didn't even recognize Him and when they did it was in the most routine of acts, and as soon as they did He left. I take that to be a model of religious experience which can be helpful, and comforting, to most of the Christians I happen to know...Christ in the Commonplace.

A New York Times Entertainment section feature several weeks ago suggested that Hollywood is "into the ordinary". Instead of a Promethean George Patton, this year's military star is a bumbling Private Benjamin; a Coal Miner's Daughter is a new heroine and, of course, Ordinary People, an extraordinary motion picture precisely because it captured the poignant ordinariness of humanity. It is a healthy dynamic, I believe, that celebration of commonness and normality. If there is significance in life for you and me it will have to be in some modest, limited, set of circumstances. Not all of us can be Chairman of the Board. Not very many can be rich and famous. The cult of rising expectations has fed our fantasies, from Playboy's promise of sensual delight to the slick ads for Johnny Walker Black Label and Rolls Royce on the Sunday Times. But for the vast majority of us life significant enough to be celebrated will be in far more modest circumstances.

More important, our faith is that God uses the ordinary for His purposes and Jesus Christ will be known and served and followed in the commonplace. There is something particularly Presbyterian about that. We were born as a church out of an idea that ordinary people, with God's help, are perfectly capable of ordering their own spiritual affairs. Their clergy are called to help them understand the Bible, but ordinariness has always been so important that we carefully circumscribe those clergy lest they begin to think they are somehow different. Those we choose to rule we call Elders - not the Board of Directors, but modestly, the Session. I confess, I wanted to call this sermon "Ordaining the Ordinary", but decided not to lest those ordained today conclude I was describing their credentials. To the contrary, our strength is in the fact that we ordain members of the church and ask them to be spiritual leaders.